

The Birth of Jesus – Luke 1:1-20

The Apostle Paul once wrote:

*God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.
²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are,
²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)*

God's greatest glory is not found in what I call the "fireworks of history" – epic battles, grandiose building projects and eloquent speeches. His greatest glory is often found in the hidden corners of the world, in places and people that are despised or ignored. The Bible is full of examples of this. The account of our Savior's birth illustrates it most beautifully.

We read:

In those days Caesar Augustus . . .

Octavian was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar and his adopted heir. He was granted the title "Augustus" from the Romans Senate and officially ruled as "Imperator" from 27 BC until 14 AD (although he actually started ruling earlier).

Augustus ruled when the Roman Empire was at its height. For the first time in hundreds of years the empire was, by and large, at peace. This began the era known as the "Pax Romana," or "Pax Augusta" which means, "the peace of Rome" and "the peace of Augustus"

It was during the reign of this earthly king of peace that God's true Prince of Peace was to be born. God set in motion an empire-wide clock work – simply to get poor Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem in time for Jesus' birth.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) (Luke 2:1-2)

In order to administer and finance his vast empire, Augustus needed to institute a revenue system. In order to do this, he ordered periodic, empire-wide censuses to take place.

Luke tells us that this particular census took place under the "governing" of a man named Quirinius. Enemies of the Gospel are often quick to point out that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus birth because Roman records indicate that He became "governor" after the death of Herod. This may be true, however the Greek word does not just mean "governor." It means "governing" - and there is evidence that Quirinius had a special assignment in Syria at the time Herod was still alive.

Because of the census:

³ (And) everyone went to his own town to register. (Luke 2:3)

This was the Jewish way of doing things. Every clan and tribe in Israel was allotted land after the conquest of Canaan. Those tribal lands were always associated with the family, so it was just natural that everyone should go back to their tribal land to be counted.

Now take a moment to imagine the mass of people moving around Israel because of the census. They were all moving primarily for one divine purpose: that Mary might end up in Bethlehem during the end of her ninth month of pregnancy.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. (Luke 2:4)

Bethlehem, which is 6 miles south of Jerusalem, was the ancestral home of King David. Boaz (the husband of Old Testament Ruth and the great grandfather of David) had grain fields outside of the town, and it is probably from these grain fields that Bethlehem got its name – which means “house of bread”

⁵ *He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:5)*

Nazareth, where poor Joseph and Mary lived, was around 80 miles north of Bethlehem. Now, I don't think many 9 month pregnant woman would want to take a 4-7 day journey by foot or donkey unless there was a good reason to do so. And there was for Mary. She needed to enroll herself as Joseph's wife. Jesus, then, would become the legal descendant of Joseph – and therefore heir to the long lost throne of David. Remember that – even though Mary herself was a descendant of David – it would be meaningless to the Jews unless Jesus' legal father (through birth, marriage or adoption) was a descendant of David.

Thus we see God at work, who:

²⁶ *From one man (he) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. (Act 17:26)*

God set Mary and Joseph in Nazareth at this time. In Rome, He allowed Augustus to gain control of the empire – knowing that this man – who knew nothing of the LORD - would call for a census that would make sure every minute prophecy of Scripture would be fulfilled – that poor and pregnant Mary would make the journey so that her child could fulfill the prophecy recorded by Micah:

² *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. " (Micah 5:2)*

What comfort do you find in the fact that God uses emperors and empires to accomplish his will?

[*Answer:* God's word tells me that his will is to love me and save me – and that God will stop at nothing to do it. Even though this world is chaotic, God is in control – working in all things for our good, as he promises: ²⁸ *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)*]

We continue:

⁶ *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, (Luke 2:6)*

Now, one should understand that Bethlehem, at this time, was a poor agricultural community with a population of a few hundred. There were not a lot of guest rooms in this town. Add to that fact that the census drew a lot of people, and you can see a problem emerging.

We don't know how long Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when she started having her contractions. What we do know is that it was evening – since she gave birth during the night. The rooms were all full and people were asleep.

Some imagine a kindly inn keeper directed Mary and Joseph to a stable adjacent his house – to at least give Mary and Joseph some cover. Others – like the Christian apologist Justin Martyr (who lived 100 to 150 years after Jesus' birth) – believe Jesus sought refuge in a small grotto or cave outside of Jerusalem that shepherds used. The truth is that we don't know for sure, and it really isn't that important. What matters is that God was directing affairs, leading history so that his Son would have a most lowly birth.

and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. (Luke 2:7)

In the simplest language the most important birth in human history is recorded. No fanfare. No flourishes. No grandiose language. Just the simple facts.

Isn't it beautiful: God choosing the lowly things of this world to shame the wise? Isn't it beautiful, how these simple words stand – how hidden behind them is a miracle so marvelous that neither Cicero nor Shakespeare would be able to find words glorious enough to describe the event they describe?

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son! This is what mankind saw – a simple birth of a baby to a poor married couple. But behind the veil of this simple birth was so much more!

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

A manger was a feeding trough for animals made out of stone. It was dirty. It was hard. It was the only place that Mary – who had no nurses, doctors or even extended family to help her- could lay her baby. The fact that she – after just giving birth – was the one who had to swaddle the baby tells you something about the lowliness and loneliness of it all.

What does the lowliness of Jesus birth tell us about God and what He considers important?

[*Answer:* God is not wowed with the great and grandiose. He is interested in the humble and contrite heart. He loves the faith that trust his promises – regardless how things appear.]

⁸ *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.* (Luke 2:8)

Shepherds were among the poor and despised in Israel. I know that it might not seem this way reading Scripture – but that's because God loves the lowly. The people, however, did not esteem shepherding at all.

It was to these lowly shepherds, who were keeping their vigil over their flocks that

⁹ *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* (Luke 2:9)

It wasn't only the sight of the angel that terrified the shepherds – it was the Glory of the LORD that terrified them. You see, this glory was not merely a bright light. It was, what the Jews call the Shekinah: the manifestation of the LORD himself as a pillar of cloud that led Israel out of Egypt. It was this very same glory that would terrify the disciples on the mount of Transfiguration – out of which the voice would call: This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

God himself appeared before the shepherds in the cloud. He had His angel - His messenger - speak to them the good news. But before we look at the good news. . .

Explain this statement: “As sinners it is our portion to look upon God with fear. He who no longer has this fear in his heart is relieved for a time, simply because he lacks the earnestness necessary to contemplate his actual relationship with God.” (Ylvisaker)

[*Answer:* If we lose our fear or terror of God, it is most likely because we are not correctly considering either our sins, God's holiness or both. The absolute holiness of God is terrifying – especially in light of our sins. And it is good for us to feel terrified, because then we will be prepared to confess our sins and look to him for forgiveness.]

¹⁰ *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.* (Luke 2:10)

There is no reason to be afraid. God did not come to judge. He came to save. He came to tell you the best news anyone could ever hear – and he wants you to share it!

¹¹ *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.* (Luke 2:11)

What a message! Today – right now, God has fulfilled what all Jewish history has been leading to. Today, in the town of David, God has fulfilled his promise regarding that town. Today a Savior – a rescuer from sin, death and the power of the devil – has been born to you – thereby fulfilling the promise he made through Isaiah. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the chosen and anointed servant of God. He is the LORD God himself.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. (Colossians 2:9)

What a message for the ages! The Christ – the Savior, who is the LORD God himself, has been born! He has come to save us from our sins. What would he look like? Where would they find him?

¹² *This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12)*

This sign was given not so much that they could identify which baby was the Savior, than it was given so that they would not take offense at his birth. In order to understand what I mean:

Contrast what the angel said about Jesus in verse 11 and circumstances in which the shepherds would find Jesus in verse 12.

[*Answer:* The angels speak about the eternal king, God and Messiah being born. These are glorious terms. But the shepherds will find this glorious God lying in a feeding trough, next to poor parents who couldn't even find an inn. Could it be that such a lowly baby is the all-glorious God? Yes, for this is what the angel says. And if the angels didn't say it – who would have believed it.]

¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:13-14)*

The veil hiding the invisible world from human eyes was drawn aside, and what a beautiful sight the shepherds are allowed to see! God is praised in the heavens above for His act of saving. The angels consider the lowly birth as one of God's greatest glories.

And they announce what His birth means to us. Peace to men. Peace – not in the worldly sense of the term, but in a far greater spiritual sense: peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. This is the peace Jesus offers to all, as he once said to his disciples:

²⁷ *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)*

The LORD offers to all the peace of forgiveness. But it is only received by those:

"on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14)

In other words, those who have been called to faith according to his wonderful grace. Believers in Christ are the only ones who possess this peace, because only they have received the message in faith. The person who does not receive the message in faith, cannot not have true peace, because He has rejected Christ who is the only giver of this peace. And this leads to the question:

What is the difference between worldly Christmas peace and true Christmas peace?

[*Answer:* The world is looking for peace in the sense of no crime and war, getting along, etc. . . . True Christmas peace deals first and foremost with our relationship with God. It flows from the forgiveness of sins.]

¹⁵ *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. (Luke 2:15-16)*

How are the Shepherds examples of how we should receive God's Word?

[*Answer:* They received the promise in eager faith. They are excited and immediately want to go and see what was promised. What an example for us. Receive the word in childlike faith. Let God's promises excite you, and then go and search the Word all the more to rejoice in his grace.]

¹⁷ *When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. (Luke 2:17-18)*

The people who heard the shepherd's that night were amazed – not so much because they believed the shepherds. They were rather astonished and perplexed at what the shepherd's claimed to have seen. This amazement, sadly, does not seem like it was combined with faith.

¹⁹ *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:19)*

Faith always turns over in mind and heart all the precious words of God – and this is exactly what Mary was doing. She pondered on all the events surrounding Jesus birth. She pondered upon the Scriptures and their fulfillment. Unlike the townsmen who were merely amazed at the shepherds' report, Mary reflected on and treasured the message they received from God. Here “we are reminded that the Gospel is not appreciated by the haughty and the proud, but by the poor, humble, the lowly.” (Arndt)

²⁰ *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:20)*

How do the shepherds serve as an example of evangelism for us?

[*Answer:* They are living examples of the passage: "*I believed; therefore I have spoken.*" (2Co 4:13). They are so overjoyed in the message of the Savior that they boldly share it – not worrying about how the news will be received, or whether or not people will think they are crazy. They don't use the excuse that they are merely unschooled shepherds who don't know how to share the Gospel. They just share it in joy – all the while maintaining their vocation as shepherds. This is how they are an example to us. May God grant us the same Christmas zeal today and always to share his wonderful news of salvation.]